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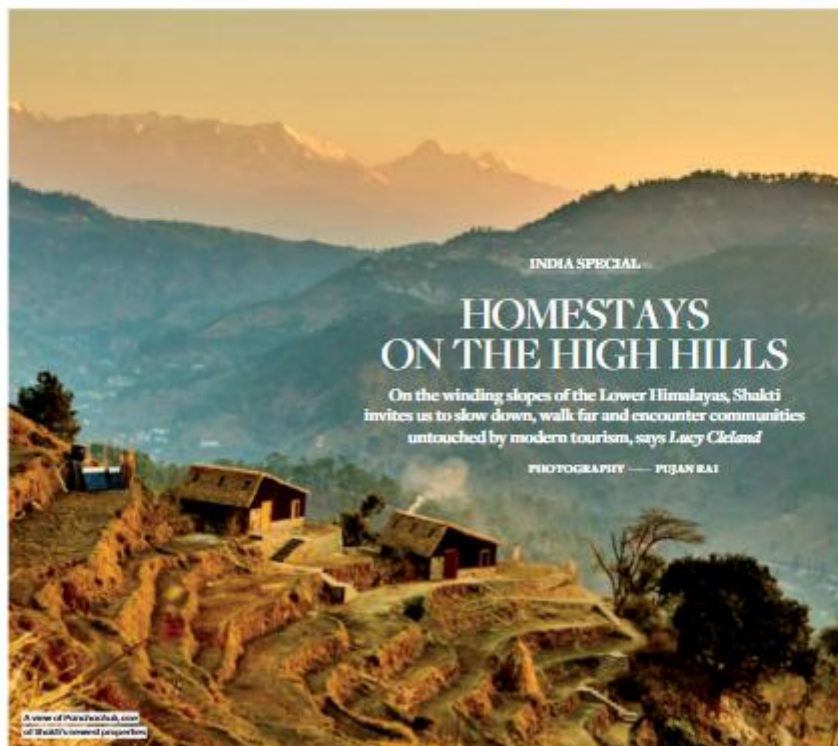
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INDIA SPECIAL

HOMESTAYS ON THE HIGH HILLS

On the winding slopes of the Lower Himalayas, Shakti invites us to slow down, walk far and encounter communities untouched by modern tourism, says *Lucy Cleland*

PHOTOGRAPHY — PUJAN RAI

A view of Parvathnagar, one of Shakti's homestay destinations



FROM LEFT: A community oven in the village of Chefchaouen, the focus of La Fiermontina; a fisherman in La Fiermontina, a fisherman's view of the stunning landscape surrounding the hotel



ONE STEP BEYOND

When a hotel merges with a community, magic happens, says *Katie Glass*, who found that intoxicating mix at La Fiermontina Ocean in Morocco



We have driven an hour south of Tangier, along Morocco's west coast, heading for La Fiermontina Ocean, a hotel perched on a rugged cliff overlooking the vast North Atlantic Ocean, with nothing beside it but the tiny village of Dehior.

Our car weaves through 150 acres of parkland, where scorched ochre earth has been newly planted with lavender bushes and olive trees, part of the hotel's plans to establish a natural park here. But obtaining such a designation is as much about what is being done on the land as the hotel's work with the local community. La Fiermontina's ambitions extend far beyond being an exceptional luxury hotel, to a holistic project unlike any destination I have seen. I'm here with Steppes Travel – to experience an example of what truly great travel looks like when it works in deep harmony with its environment.

The La Fiermontina Ocean project was imagined by Italian-Moroccan siblings Fouad Giacomo and Yasmina Antonia Filali, whose mixed heritage is felt in their ambitions: to create a destination where La Dolce Vita

La Fiermontina Ocean project was imagined to create a destination where La Dolce Vita glamour is enhanced by working alongside local people

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Giacomo initially bought this remote outcrop overlooking the Khemis Sahel dune without knowing what he would do here. He first built five houses, since extended to 11 Ocean Suites and a grand three-bedroom Akhazane Villa. He worked with the architects behind his other properties –

Palazzo Bozzi Corso and Hermonte Museum in Puglia, and La Fiermontina Vendôme in Paris – alongside native builders to create low buildings that seem to rise from the land. Revelling in their spectacular positions, like Bond villain lairs, the floor-to-ceiling windows and infinity pools offer views across rugged, olive-tree-dotted hills undulating down to the wild coast.

Unlike the frantic souls of Tangier, this rugged strip of coast is of yet undiscovered. The morning air, sweetly scented with rosemary and lavender, sings with the brush of waves and chattering birds.

At every turn, the hotel amalgamates with its environment. Mush villas, dressed by French interior designers Charles-Philippe and Christophe of Laboratoire Design, embrace indigenous materials: bright Berber rugs and Atlas Mountain textiles.

The hotel's boutique stocks locally-made produce – there's clay tagine pots, for example, and embroidered clothes by Migrants du Monde, a brand whose profits go directly to the foundation Filali created in 1994. It funds a hospitality school in nearby Larache.

This foundation is the start of the real story here, a symbiotic relationship between the hotel and the nearby village so genuine and profound it led Steppes to bring their Morocco itineraries here, inspired by the way the hotel has gone beyond the superficial to forge a unique relationship with its community.

Initially, the relationships grew from dependence. Building in this sparsely inhabited outcrop, Giacomo →

TRAVEL & FOOD



FROM TOP: View of the village of Dichier, where hotel guests can enjoy traditional Moroccan food and drink. The hotel has created village rooms where guests can sleep and connect with the locals.

knew the lodge's success depended on local support. He invested early in improving infrastructure in Dichier – building road access, bringing water and electricity to the area, and offering locals jobs at the hotel.

Giacommo asked the locals what resources they needed. Education and healthcare, they replied. The hotel began supplying regular visits from medical vans. They cleaned up the village, introduced bins, paid the municipality to bring rubbish lorries here and extended the local school.

The intention, Giacomo explains, was never to control their neighbours but to enable them, giving them opportunity and, most significantly, a reason to stay here.

Initially the hotel worked happily alongside its neighbours, but a significant shift came

with the innovative idea to ask villagers if they would host hotel guests for breakfast in their homes.

It is a short, bumpy drive down a dusty road from the hotel to Dichier village, past herdsmen driving goats and women returning from picking olives, swaddled in bright clothes. Homes sit in small compounds with tin roofs and sun bleached blue walls, where lazy dogs sleep in sunny courtyards. We enter the home of a local woman named Fatna, who stands holding a brass jug to wash our hands, with a little girl hiding behind her skirts. The local women host these breakfasts; the men are out with the cows.

Welcoming us into her home, sitting on stone benches in her simple courtyard, Fatna serves us a feast on brightly painted terracotta plates: local olives, soft white Moroccan feta cheese, chunky homemade peanut butter, a delicious soup of fava beans and hot, freshly cooked pancakes drizzled with dark local honey.

Hotel translators accompany guests to enable them to connect with locals, and for the meal to become a literal chance to break bread – to chat, learn from each other and simply connect on a human level so often lost in modern travel. Giacomo tells me Moroccan guests have emerged from the experience with tears in their eyes, moved by how disconnected they have become from their own people.

As these breakfasts have evolved, the relationship between the local people and the hotel has grown, and with it trust. Villagers have now welcomed the creation of four newly built village rooms, set on the very edge of their community, just 20 yards from where they sleep.

These village rooms are set around Café Maure, a traditional style café with spectacular views across the surrounding wheat fields, and a hammam where tailor-made treatments are offered by local women.

As the collaboration between the hotel and village grows stronger, Steppes sees La Fiermonina Ocean as exemplifying how great travel could and should look: a destination where visitors consider where their money is going, and where travel doesn't take from a place but enhances it. ■

BOOK IT: Steppes Travel offers a seven day bespoke tour of northern Morocco from £5,995pp (excluding flights from the UK). steppestravel.com

Katie's return flights from London to Tangier had a carbon footprint of 540.1kg of CO₂e (co2offset.co.uk)